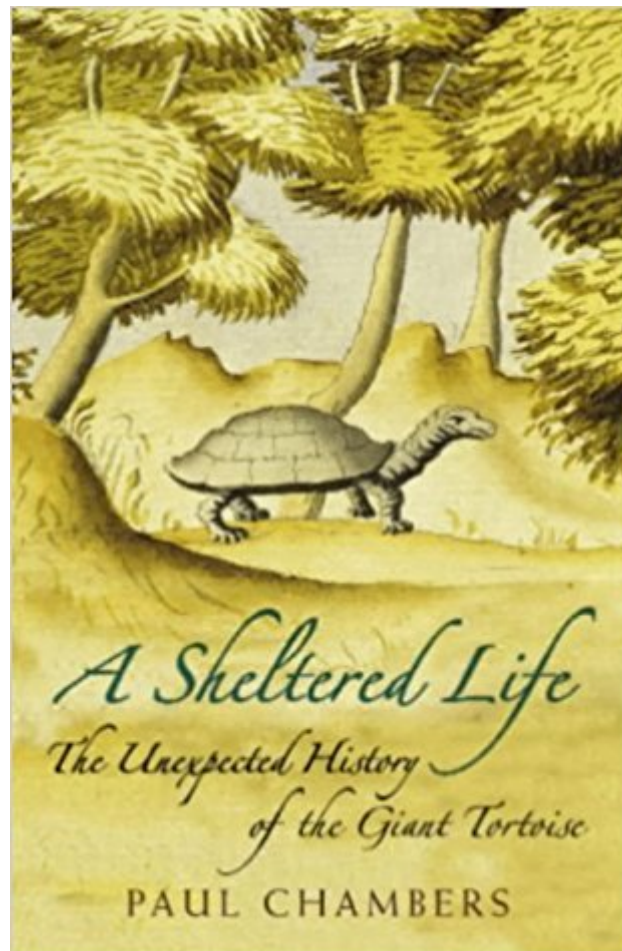




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# A Sheltered Life: The Unexpected History Of The Giant Tortoise



## Synopsis

For millennia these mighty beasts lived in isolation on remote oceanic islands such as the Galapagos, Seychelles and Mauritius. From the sixteenth century, the discovery that tortoises were good to eat and their strategic location led to a wholesale plunder of their population by ships making long voyages. Later, Victorian scientists became fascinated by these creatures, and from wondering why it was that such large animals were always to be found on remote islands came the first understanding of ecology and biogeography. It was the giant tortoise that directly inspired Darwin to create his theory of natural selection. Could a tortoise which Darwin took from the Galapagos in 1835 still be alive today in an Australian zoo? Indeed many people have become fascinated with these gentle giants. We learn why the French were surrendered the island of Mauritius but balked at handing over their mascot tortoise and why the discovery of some dodo bones inspired Victorian scientists to launch a 'save the tortoise campaign'. The twentieth century saw the establishment of wildlife reserves in the Galapagos and elsewhere but it was too late for many species. Paul Chambers shows how modern genetics has been able to track down members of what were once believed to be extinct populations of these magnificent creatures.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

They seem the stuff of myths or legends--giant tortoises large enough to carry a human on their backs. In 1535 the first description of an actual giant tortoise reached the king of Spain when a Spanish vessel off the coast of South America noted the presence of giant tortoises on a group of

"worthless" islands. At about the same time, tortoises were found on isolated islands in the Indian Ocean near Madagascar. So began the checkered relationship between giant tortoises and humans. Chambers, a scientist with London's Natural History Museum, recounts the often-tragic story of the giant tortoises in this highly readable account. To Charles Darwin the tortoises were seminal for his theory of evolution. In modern times, the remaining tortoises are being bred in captivity. Written in a conversational style that makes the science easy to understand, and full of engaging stories, this is the single best book on the subject available. Nancy Bent

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'Pacy, light-footed, graceful and diverting... be grateful to Chambers for bringing so much information about it into one accessible place.' -- Tom Fort, Sunday Telegraph 20040627 'A wonderful exploration of the history of this gentle giant ... Lovingly researched and engagingly narrated' -- P D Smith, The Guardian 20040731 'Chambers' volume is entertaining, elegiac and anything but plodding. With wonderfully arcane asides ... this is a surprisingly revelatory volume' -- Scotland on Sunday 20040704 'Hugely entertaining' -- Daily Telegraph 20040828 'Quirky ... an enjoyable account of an intriguing creature' -- The Scotsman 20040807 'This book is as entrancing as the creature it describes' -- Independent 20050408 'Very readable and full of engrossing anecdotes' -- New Scientist 20050402 'An entertaining volume with a fascinating look into the giant tortoise's history and evolution.' -- Sunday Telegraph 20050327 'A delightful tribute' -- Guardian 20050409

I bought this book on a whim for a loved one who is also a turtle biologist and was en route to the Seychelles. It turned out to be a huge success and was read three times before she left for her trip. So anyone interested in history, nature, world politics, this is a must read book.

Very good and sometimes sad history of human interaction with Giant Tortoises.

I am ashamed. I knew little about giant tortoises except that Darwin had one named Harriet and that there are some that live in the hills of the Galapagos that go into warm volcanic soil to lay their eggs. Had I chanced upon this book before my visit to the Mascarene Islands, I would've given these ancient, magnificent, and awe-inspiring reptiles their deserved attention when I met them. Paul Chambers has done a remarkable job in recognising the characters of his audience as he has delivered a wonderfully entertaining recount of the discovery, torment, exhaltation, recognition, then

conservation of the giant tortoises of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Be convinced that Chambers' knack at story-telling, served by intricate and exhaustive research processes, is that which has made this book a success. No doubt, the history of the giant tortoises is itself a truly fascinating topic, however, it is a long history and Chambers knits it tightly into just over 300-pages. Complimented with thought-provoking illustrations and guiding maps, Chambers also supplements readers with archived photographs where available and enchanting excerpts from the journals of renowned naturalists including Darwin and Wallace (whom, when you read this book, aren't as significant characters to the story as you think!). Chambers has inspired curiosity and instilled amazement in this group of animals that has come so close to being decimated by development. A well-paced read, that is acutely balanced and finely structured, be prepared to journey back into the ages of the sea-faring colonists, and discover as they did, the unique giant tortoises that have for millennia, led a sheltered life.

Paul Chambers writes well. He is also an exceptional researcher and storyteller. I had heard Chambers speak on one of the BBC's Naked Scientists podcasts and not only enjoyed his profound knowledge but also his sense of restrained drama. Yet I picked up this book twice before making the purchase. How could a feminist and museologist find something of interest in a natural history of the giant tortoise. Something told me to take the plunge and make the purchase. Within the first page I was captivated, Chambers draws us into the scenario of the young Mr Darwin arriving at the Galapagos and being asked by his host, "you will, of course, stay for lunch? [...] I can offer you goat, pig or tortoise?" As a reader I enjoyed the way Chambers organised each of the chapters, balancing out the stories of the Indian Ocean and Galapagos tortoises, elaborating in careful detail the story of Charles Darwin, Albert Gunter one of the earliest ecology environmentalists, a taste of Victorian collectomania as demonstrated by the fervour of Walter Rothschild and the period of the great scientific expeditions (aka raiding parties) by leading universities of the time. Interspersed throughout the chapters was a story of the early whalers, trade routes, colonisation, territorial protection and later, DNA modelling. In essence, this book was a riveting read with a well hammered environmental message. And with numerous mentions of the word 'museum' I now wonder how I could have hesitated to read this book in the first place. I'm off to read Chambers first book now, *Bones of Contention*.

As a lifelong fan of turtles in general and giant tortoises in particular, I was thrilled to find out about this book, and even more thrilled to read it. While there is much here that makes me ashamed of our

species, there is also great entertainment, a terrific conservation message, and much to challenge the notion that we have been given, or assumed, "dominion" over the birds and the beasts. Mr. Chambers interweaves the sad fate of these fantastic creatures with the foibles and passions of such historical luminaries as Charles Darwin and a former head of the Rothschild clan. The result is a poignant and masterful portrayal of the magnificence of nature, and the bumbling of those of us who ignore the natural world, as well as the strange twists that befall even those of us who love it. I recommend this book to anyone exploring the history of conservation, those concerned with the future of the planet, and, of course, turtle lovers everywhere. Bravo!

This is a flawless study of how huge tortoises were at first discovered, then eaten, then sold for their oil and shells, bred, and analyzed by a lot of top zoologists, including Darwin himself! Also, a nice look at the human and biological history of the Galapagos Islands, where the author claims that tortoises and their evolution were as important to Darwin's ideas as the more famous finches. One tortoise still living has been said to be a survivor of Darwin's menagerie, and the author studies the geneological background of this large,elderly lady! He is very skeptical that the animal has lived to be over 170, since the 1830's, but gives a strong case of birth in the 1870's, still very elderly in her 130's!! With some nice drawings , and general large turtle history in islands in the Indian ocean ,this book is a fairly easy, and very interesting page turner, especially for so heavy and old a subject!

I absolutely loved this book. In fact, many things I learned in it have become part of my "regularly restated facts" about tortoises.

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